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Jennifer Engemann  
*Governors State University*

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### **Acknowledgements**

I would like thank my family for all of their support on helping me get through this semester and this program. Getting through Student Teaching and Graduate Seminar in the same semester was definitely not easy and your patience and understanding is truly appreciated! I would not be graduating without any of you. I would like to thank Dr. Philip Boudreau for providing me with his guidance, knowledge, and support on this research project and in special education. What I have learned in your classroom throughout this entire program will continue to shape me as a special educator. Thank you to the members of my committee and my classmates for always being ready and willing to assist whenever I needed help. Last, but definitely not least, I would like to thank the awesome special education teachers who didn't hesitate to participate in my study. I appreciate you all!

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Investigating Special Education Teachers' Knowledge and Beliefs of Learned Helplessness in  
Students with Mild to Moderate Disabilities

Jennifer Engemann

Prepared in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Masters of Arts Degree in Multicategorical Special Education  
Governors State University

Spring 2016



### Abstract

This research study investigated educators' knowledge and beliefs of learned helplessness in student with mild to moderate disabilities. Prior research indicates that students with disabilities are more prone to developing the learned helplessness condition in comparison to their non-disabled peers. Studies provide evidence of a direct correlation between school failure and learned helplessness. A quantitative descriptive research method was used to collect and analyze data. A survey design method was used to assess special educators' perceptions of the learned helplessness condition (Gay et al., 2012). There were 40 special education teachers from suburban Chicago high schools who participated in this research study. Based on the obtained and analyzed data from the surveyed special education teachers a majority seem to have an understanding on the overall concept of learned helplessness. Further research is suggested to better understand educators' beliefs.

Investigating Special Education Teachers' Knowledge and Beliefs of Learned Helpless in  
Students with Mild to Moderate Disabilities

**Chapter I**

**Introduction**

Research has shown the importance of students' attribution of success or failure. Horner and Gaither (2004) explain that "attributions are the reasons people give for their success or failure on a particular task. Some common attributions in an academic setting are effort, innate ability or intelligence, task difficult, teacher help, and personal help" (p. 165). When students believe that failure is the result of internal factors and success is the result of external factors, they can develop a poor locus of control (Gordon & Gordon, 2006; Horner & Gaither, 2004). The belief that control is outside of oneself can lead to reduced effort towards achievement. These attributions can impact students' academic and functional growth as they continue their educational careers (Banks & Woolfson, 2008).

Previous studies have suggested that there is a direct correlation between academic success and individual attributions (Horner & Gaither, 2004). For instance, students who acquire low perceptions about their academic performance may be unsuccessful at completing challenging academic tasks and could display a decreased amount of persistence, poor self-determination, and a lack of motivation in the classroom (Berkeley, Mastropieri, & Scruggs, 2011; Gordon & Gordon, 2006; Sutherland & Singh, 2006). "Specifically, low-ability attributions or the failure to maintain a high ability belief is thought to be the main mediator of low expectations for future success, lack of persistent achievement behaviors, and negative

affect” (Hodoka & Fincham, 1995, p. 375) As a result such students will experience a cycle of failure that will reinforce these negative beliefs.

Students identified with disabilities are significantly more inclined to develop negative attributions regarding their academic success or failures than their nondisabled peers (Banks & Woolfson, 2007). As a result, they can develop learned helplessness, which is a conditioned response to those events that students believe are out of their locus of control (Gordon & Gordon, 2006). Pasta, Mendola, Longobardi, Prino, and Gastaldi (2013) noted that students with mild to moderated disabilities “are doomed to a negative school experience and to develop a ‘depressed’ or ‘learned impotence’ attributive style” (p. 652). In addition to school failure, other potential problems for students with disabilities that develop learned helplessness include, but are not limited to, the following: low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, isolation, problem behaviors, school drop outs, and substance abuse (Attwood & Wolff, 2005; Berkeley et al., 2011).

Research suggests that teachers and parents can have a profound effect on students’ perceptions about their individual capabilities (Jones & Hensley, 2012; Walling & Martinek, 1995). Jones and Hensley (2012) examined teacher-student relationships and concluded that, with the appropriate amount of guidance, a student can become more independent and confident in their academics. This demonstrates that negative attributions for success and failure can be replaced and that the learned helpless condition can be removed. Parents also are crucial to a student's self-esteem, motivation, and academic achievement in the classroom. For example, a student's self-perceptions can be affected when basic needs are not met because of parental financial problems or other factors at home (Walling & Martinek, 1995). Also, if the parent has a

limited educational background to provide a firm foundation for a student's growth in the classroom, then there is a strong likelihood that the student will develop learned helplessness (Walling & Martinek, 1995).

### **Statement of Problem**

Walling and Martinek (1995) explain how many educators struggle with understanding what causes failure or lack of task persistence in students who are otherwise academically capable. This lack of understanding could actually contribute to a student's learned helpless condition (Gordon & Gordon, 2006; Horner & Gaither, 2004; Sutherland & Singh, 2006; Walling & Martinek, 1995). For instance, an educator could unknowingly reinforce an avoidance behavior by providing too much support to a student who is learned helpless (McCarter, 2013). McCarter (2013) explains how "this 'support' is what helps to cultivate learned helplessness" (p. 69). Additionally, educators can reinforce the learned helpless condition by offering criticism instead of praise or by attributing academic failures to internal factors such as inability and academic successes to external factors such as luck (Gordon & Gordon, 2006; Sutherland & Singh, 2006).

Research indicates that students with mild to moderate disabilities are more susceptible to developing learned helplessness in comparison to their nondisabled peers (Banks & Woolfson, 2008; Borkowski, Weyhing, & Carr, 1988; Kerr, 2001). By the time these students enter high school, the severity of their learned helpless condition may have increased due to continuous exposure to repeated failures. Additionally, students with disabilities may attribute their classification in special education to inability or failure (Kerr, 2001). Therefore, special education teachers need to be aware of learned helplessness and how its impact can hinder

students' academic success. Acquiring such knowledge is essential if educators' want to help their students regain a sense of control (Kerr, 2001). If this matter is not addressed, students with disabilities will continue to be exposed to failure regardless of the types of modified instruction or interventions they are receiving (Sutherland & Singh, 2006; Walling & Martinek, 1995).

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the knowledge and beliefs of special education teachers at suburban Chicago public high schools regarding the theory of learned helplessness as it relates to students identified with mild to moderate disabilities. This investigation will help support whether there is a need to increase awareness for special educators about learned helplessness and its impact on academic achievement. If the collected data indicates a lack of background knowledge on this condition, then further research can be conducted to examine how to increase educators' awareness on the prevalence of learned helplessness as it relates to students with disabilities. By acquiring a complete understanding of this concept, special education teachers will be able to assist in the prevention and possible removal of learned helplessness; which can ultimately increase academic achievement in students with disabilities (Gordon & Gordon, 2006; Sutherland & Singh, 2006; Walling & Martinek, 1995).

### **Questions of the Study**

There are two questions that guided this research study. The first question focused on the background knowledge special education teachers at suburban Chicago public high schools have on the overall concept of learned helplessness. The second question addressed the teachers'

perceptions of how learned helplessness affects the academic achievement of students with mild to moderate disabilities.

### **Assumptions and Limitations**

One assumption of this study is that special education teachers at suburban Chicago public high schools have some background knowledge of the concept of learned helplessness. Also, it is assumed that educators' would have an opinion on how that concept would affect the academic achievement of students with mild to moderate disabilities. One limitation to this study is the possibility of lack of honesty when attempting to answer the questions of the survey. In addition, some participants may not be thoughtful in their response. Another limitation would be the lack of time provided to collect data. This study is being completed for the Graduate Seminar course at Governor State University in partial fulfillment for the Masters of Arts Degree in Multicategorical Special Education. Therefore, the researcher will only have a semester to complete this research study.

### **Educational Significance of the Study**

Students develop learned helplessness after repeated exposure to academic failures. Walling and Martinek (1995) refer to the classroom as a "prime 'breeding ground' for failure experiences" (p. 454). Students with disabilities may have more experiences with academic failure which places them at a higher risk for developing learned helplessness (Banks & Woolfson, 2008; Borkowski et al., 1988; Kerr, 2001). Students who have this condition will lack the confidence and motivation to persist and complete challenging academic tasks (Walling & Martinek, 1995; Zuroff, 1980). As a result, these students may experience continued failures which will ultimately justify and reinforce their feelings of helplessness. A positive student-

teacher relationship can have a meaningful impact on students who are learned helpless. For instance, a supportive relationship can help to increase a student's self-esteem, motivation, and task persistence in academic tasks (Sutherland & Singh, 2006; Walling & Martinek, 1995). It is, therefore, important that these special education teachers know about learned helplessness and its impact to promote and encourage student academic achievement.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Attributions.** Banks and Woolfson (2008) describe attributions as “casual explanations that people assign to the events that happen to and around them” (p. 49). In education, students who develop learned helplessness will attribute academic failure to internal factors that are uncontrollable (Banks & Woolfson, 2008; Horner & Gaither, 2004). Therefore, when a student experiences repeated failures they may begin to assign maladaptive attributions or “casual explanations” towards their achievement (Banks & Woolfson, 2008, p. 49; Horner & Gaither, 2004).

**Helplessness.** “Helplessness is a psychological state that frequently results when events appear to be uncontrollable” (Gordon & Gordon, 2006, p. 5). Learned helplessness describes a conditioned response to those particular situations (Gordon & Gordon, 2006). Students who develop attributions for failure may begin to develop feelings of helplessness, which can potentially become a learned or conditioned response to academic achievement.

**Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA).** IDEA, is an educational law that guarantees that students with disabilities will be given a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment (Rothstein & Johnson, 2013; Webber & Plotts, 2008). (Commonly referred to as the former name Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA))

**Learned Helplessness.** A state of inaction and depression arising from a realization that one’s efforts are ineffectual when achieving one’s goals (Gordon & Gordon, 2006, p. 10) (Can be referred to as learned helplessness or the learned helplessness condition)



### **Chapter Summary**

Prior research has indicated that a student's attributions can have a significant impact on academic achievement. Horner and Gaither (2004) explain that there is a direct correlation between school failure and negative attributions. When students are exposed to a cycle school failure and develop low perceptions of their abilities, then they are at risk of developing learned helplessness (Gordon & Gordon, 2006; Pasta et al., 2013). Students identified with disabilities are more inclined to develop poor attributions towards academic achievement than their non-disabled peers (Banks & Woolfson, 2007). Special education teachers need to be aware of the learned helplessness condition to combat school failure among students with disabilities (Walling & Martinek, 1995). The purpose of this study was to investigate the knowledge and beliefs of special education teachers at suburban Chicago public high schools regarding the theory of learned helplessness as it relates to students with mild to moderate disabilities.

## **Chapter II**

### **Review of Literature**

#### **Legislations**

The Civil Rights Movement marked major changes for the betterment and protection of individuals with disabilities. In 1970 Congress passed the Education of the Handicapped Act (EHA), which supplied public schools federal funding to provide special education for students with disabilities (Rothstein & Johnson, 2013). In an extension to EHA, in 1975 Congress introduced the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), commonly known as Public Law 94-142, to improve and secure specific legal rights for the education of students with disabilities. “The EAHCA amended Part B of the EHA and was significant because it provided the important elements of procedural safeguards, integration, and nondiscriminatory testing and evaluation materials and procedures” (Rothstein & Johnson, 2013, p. 19). EAHCA was finalized in 1977 to guarantee students from age three through 21 and identified as having a disability had access to a free and appropriate education (Rothstein & Johnson, 2013; Webber & Plotts, 2008). In late 1980s, EAHCA extended special education services to infants, toddlers, and preschool children and began to include transition services for secondary services (Webber & Plotts, 2008).

#### **Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act**

Over the next decade, this public law was continuously amended to specify and enhance various special education services for students with disabilities. The primary goal was to ensure that this population had access to a free and appropriate public education. Webber and Plotts (2008) discuss how the focus of EAHCA began to emphasize the individual, which led to the act being renamed in 1990 to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Rothstein & Johnson, 2013). IDEA guarantees that students with disabilities would be given a free and

appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. In 1997, IDEA underwent another significant change when Congress added amendments including provisions to discipline procedures, stronger parent roles, access to the general curriculum, and higher expectations in the classroom for students receiving special education services under IDEA (Webber & Plotts, 2008).

The enactment of the Reauthorization of IDEA in 2004 also made significant improvements for students with disabilities. Now renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA), it included emphasis on teacher quality, the individualized education program (IEP), an increase in federal funding, flexibility in diagnosing students with learning disabilities, allocation of special education funds to general education to reduce referrals, and revised IEP's (Webber & Plotts, 2008). To be eligible for special education and other related services under IDEA, a student must be three through 21 years of age and be identified as having one or more of the following disabilities: Cognitive Impairment (CI), Orthopedic Impairment (OI), Other Health Impairment (OHI), Specific Learning Disability (SLD), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), Emotional Disturbance (ED), Autism (AUT), Speech and Language Impairment, Multiple Disabilities, Developmental Delay, Deaf, Blind, or Deaf/Blind (Webber & Plotts, 2008). Table 1 shown below lists characteristics of each disability.

Table 1

*Categories of disability under IDEA*

Federal Disability Term	Brief Description
Hearing impairment	A partial or complete loss of hearing

Table 1 (continued)

*Categories of disability under IDEA*

Federal Disability Term	Brief Description
Visual impairment, including blindness	A partial or complete loss of vision
Specific Learning disability (LD)	A disorder related to processing information that leads to difficulties in reading, writing, and computing; the most common disability, accounting for half of all students receiving special education.
Speech or language impairment	A disorder related to accurately producing the sounds of language or meaningfully using language to communicate.
Intellectual disability	Significant limitations in intellectual ability and adaptive behavior; this disability occurs in a range of severity.
Emotional Disturbance	Significant problems in the social-emotional area to a degree that learning is negatively affected.
Autism	A disorder characterized by extraordinary difficulty in social responsiveness; this disability occurs in many different forms and may be mild or significant.
Deaf-blindness	A simultaneous significant hearing loss and significant vision loss.
Orthopedic impairment	A significant physical limitation that impairs the ability to move or complete motor activities.

Table 1 (Continued)

*Categories of disability under IDEA*

Federal Disability Term	Brief Description
Traumatic brain injury (TBI)	A medical condition denoting a serious brain injury that occurs as a result of accident or injury; the impact of this disability varies widely but may affect learning, behavior, social skills, and language.
Other health impairment (OHI)	A disease or health disorder so significant that it negatively affects learning; examples include cancer, sickle-cell anemia, and diabetes.
Multiple disabilities	The simultaneous presence of two or more disabilities such that none can be identified as the primary disability; the most common example is the occurrence of mental retardation and physical disabilities.
Deafness	A hearing impairment that is so severe that the child is impaired in processing linguistic information through hearing, with or without amplification that adversely affects a child's educational performance.

Note. Adapted from *Including students with special needs: A practical guide for classroom teachers*, p. 22, by M. Friend & W. Bursuck, 2009 Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

**Rehabilitation Act Section 504**

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 is a civil rights law that also protects students with disabilities (Rothstein & Johnson, 2013; Webber & Plotts, 2008). “This piece of legislation

focused on three issues: provision of services for persons with severe disabilities, an emphasis on research and training, and delineation of special responsibilities of the federal government” (Webber & Plotts, 2008, p. 39). Section 503 and 504 of this act is important for individuals with disabilities. Section 503 addresses employment of individuals with disabilities and Section 504 focuses on education (Webber & Plotts, 2008). Section 504 covers students who are not eligible for special education services under IDEA. However, this act still guarantees that students have access to a free and appropriate public education. Unlike IDEA, school districts do not receive financial funding under a section 504 plan (Rothstein & Johnson, 2013; Webber & Plotts, 2008). An example of a student who may have a 504 plan includes, but is not limited to, a student who has diabetes, asthma, or another mental or physical disability that limits them in everyday activities (Rothstein & Johnson, 2013; Webber & Plotts, 2008). Webber and Plotts (2008) explain that section 504 also “pertains to colleges and universities receiving federal funds, thereby extending rights to college students with disabilities” (p. 39).

### **Background on Learned Helplessness**

The concept of the psychological condition “learned helplessness” has its origins in the early twentieth century with Russian physiologist Ivan Pavlov. While studying the digestive processes of canines, Pavlov came across the principle of “classical conditioning” (Webber & Plotts, 2008). He discovered that the dogs elicited a specific conditioned response to the anticipation of food (Webber & Plotts, 2008). Pavlov discovered that the dogs would start to salivate when they would see their feeding dishes or when they would hear the footsteps of the person who typically came with their food. After this observation, Pavlov theorized that he could condition dogs to salivate by pairing food and different neutral or conditioned stimuli other than

footsteps or feeding dishes. “Thus the classical conditioning paradigm was established: an unconditioned stimulus (meat powder) could be paired with a previous neutral or conditioned stimulus (sound of a bell) to elicit a conditioned response (salivation)” (Webber & Plotts, 2008, p. 166). Pavlov’s discovery would lead to the development of the phenomenon of the learned helpless condition.

During the 1960s, psychologist Martin Seligman and his colleagues first used the term “learned helplessness.” Similar to Pavlov, Seligman unexpectedly encountered this phenomenon during his “Shuttle Box” experiment, which was also conducted with canines (Gordon & Gordon, 2006; Luchow, Crown, & Kahl, 2001). The Shuttle Box experiment, while seemingly unethical, involved administering random electric shocks to three different groups of dogs (Gordon & Gordon, 2006). Dogs in the experimental group were restrained by a harness and conditioned to associate the administered shock to the sound of a tone (Seligman & Maier, 1967). That is, the “locus of control” for this group was external. When placed in the shuttle box, this group does not make any attempt to escape their shock (Gordon & Gordon, 2006; Seligman & Maier, 1967). In the control groups almost every dog attempted to escape the shock when placed in the shuttle box. .”Research concerned with learned helplessness in humans was initially guided by extrapolations from results with animals” (Zuroff, 1980, p. 130). Seligman’s conclusions lead him to believe that there are three significant deficits that happen when a person confronts a situation that appears out of their locus of control. Zuroff (1980) explains that

These three deficits included: (a) a motivational deficit on tasks administered after the helpless training (the performance deficit), (b) a cognitive deficit consisting of an

inability to recognize contingencies between responses and outcomes (retarded contingency learning), and (c) depressed affect. (p. 130)

### **Social Theory: Learned Helplessness and the Holocaust**

The events of the World War II and the Holocaust produced an interest in human responses to adverse stimuli. Individuals who were victims of concentration camps were conditioned to view their situation as uncontrollable or hopeless (Tedeschi, 1972). When being forced to go into camps by the Nazi Party, victims were robbed of all their possessions, separated from their families and had to abandon their religious beliefs in order to survive their imprisonment. Tedeschi (1972) described victims of the Holocaust as individuals “who were deprived of affect, self-esteem, and every form of stimulation, so totally exhausted both physically and emotionally that they had given the environment total power over them” (p. 128).

During captivity, victims of the Holocaust perceived that nothing was in their locus of control and that death was unescapable. “Prisoners who came to believe the repeated statements of the guards...who came to feel that their environment was one over which they could exercise no influence whatever, these prisoners were, in a literal sense, walking corpses” (Tedschi, 1972, p. 128). Victims of the holocaust who were children were more susceptible to developing the learned helpless condition. A child who survived the imprisonment of the concentration camps during the Holocaust were conditioned to believe that external components controlled their destiny and everything was out of his or her locus of control (Kellerman, 2009). “In addition, the lack of safety, predictability, and trust, together with the overwhelming fear, powerlessness and loss of control became a permanent learning experience which continued to limit their sense of independence and autonomy all through life” (Kellerman, 2009, p. 56).



### **Defining Learned Helplessness**

Gordon and Gordon (as cited in Greer & Wethered, 1987) provide a definition: “Learned helplessness is a phenomenon wherein people are repeatedly exposed to situations beyond their control. Such exposure results in passivity, decreased interest and a reduction in the initiation of responses” (p. 10). Although there are other definitions, they contain common elements (e.g., inaction, lack of persistence, uncontrollable, and lack of motivation). Gordon and Gordon (2006) note that this condition is a learned response and should not be defined as a learning problem. The student with learned helplessness has the ability to achieve academic success; however, his or her attributions need to be reconditioned. “These children have a conditioned response to turn off after failure” (Gordon & Gordon, 2006, p. 12). Their thinking will appear to be impaired due to their maladaptive attributions for success and failure (Gordon & Gordon, 2006).

### **Learned Helplessness in the Classroom**

Learned helplessness can develop in multiple contexts however; can become more prevalent in an academic setting. Common characteristics typically seen in the classroom of students who are learned helpless include, but are not limited to the following: low self-esteem, lack of effort, procrastination, frustration, inattentiveness, withdrawal, and anxiety (Gordon & Gordon, 2006). It is important to note that students who have developed this condition will attempt to disguise their feelings of inability and lack of control through various avoidance behaviors (Gordon & Gordon, 2006). Student behaviors may also reflect symptoms of depression due to their low self-perceptions on academic ability. According to Gordon and Gordon (2006), there are a total of nine symptoms psychologists use to diagnose depression. In students who are

learned helpless, they are can display up to eight of the nine characteristics used for diagnosis (Gordon & Gordon, 2006).

Walling and Martinek (1995) describe the classroom as the ideal environment for the learned helpless condition to cultivate. “For adolescent students, it seems that learned helplessness would be especially compounded given that they have already had ample opportunities to succeed and fail” (Walling & Martinek, 1995, p.454). These opportunities in the school setting can lead to the development of negative attributions towards achievement. Also, children are in a setting that promotes academic and social comparison in relation to their peers. This comparison can result in children adapting poor self-perceptions if they believe their academic ability is lower than their classmates (Walling & Martinek, 1995).

As children advance in grade levels, the learned helpless condition can increase in severity (Walling & Martinek, 1995). This condition can increase due to multiple causes in and outside of the classroom. For instance, a child who had negative attributions for mathematics in the fourth grade may implement those same expectations for achievements to other subjects by the ninth grade. “The extent of that severity can have a profound effect on recovery from failure and responsiveness to intervention” (Walling & Martinek, 1995, p. 464).

### **Learned Helplessness: A Case Study**

Walling and Martinek (1995) conducted a case study involving a sixth grade student who appeared to have developed the learned helplessness condition. The primary researcher was a part time teacher at the student’s school and acted as a participant observer. The researchers analyzed the student’s learned helpless condition through observations and background information to understand the severity of the situation. Walling and Martinek (1995) discussed how “it is

important to understand the underlying factors (e.g., home, school, peers) that have significant impact on a child's perceptions of ability and control" (p. 455). After researchers developed a "comprehensive profile" on the student, their goal was to explore intervention programs that would be appropriate in the removal of the students learned helplessness (Walling & Martinek, 1995, p.455).

Data shown in this case study showed the students learned helpless condition was more severe and complex than researchers originally anticipated (Walling & Martinek, 1995). Walling and Martinek (1995) had anticipated. The comprehensive profile indicated that the student had developed significant avoidance behaviors, low self-perceptions, and negative self-talk in more than one school setting as a result of learned helplessness (Walling & Martinek, 1995). Due to the unexpected severity of the student's learned helplessness, Walling and Martinek (1995) were unable to design an intervention program for the student. The researchers did suggest the use of common teacher practices in a singular classroom settings when attempting to support a student who has developed the learned helpless condition to an advanced degree. Walling and Martinek (1995) noted that these common practices "appear to be so vital to the success of learned helpless students that they may be worth stressing, repeating, and review" (p. 465).

### **Attributions and Learned Helplessness**

One common misconception is that learned helplessness is caused solely by a student's repeated exposure to failure. While academic failure does contribute to this condition, it is not the sole cause. When children begin to develop maladaptive attributions towards their success or failure, then they may develop a conditioned response to turn off after failure (Gordon & Gordon, 2006). This process is part of attributional theory and involves the way a child

perceives the reasons for his or her failure (Webber & Plotts, 2008). Additionally, factors outside of the classroom can heavily influence a student's attributions for achievement (Hodoko & Finchman, 1995; Walling & Martinek, 1995). If negative circumstances impact a student's basic needs, then there is a high probability for a low self-perception which can contribute to internal explanations for failure (Walling & Martinek, 1995). Several researchers have conducted studies to examine how casual attributions affect student's academic and functional achievement (Goetz & Dweck, 1980; Horner & Gaither, 2004; Okolo, 1992)

### **Attributional Retraining and Elementary Students**

Horner and Gaither (2004) conducted a study that examined the effects of attribution retraining instruction (ARI) on second grade students' negative attributions for their academic achievement and also on the students' mathematics. "ARI sessions lasted for approximately 45 minutes a day for 8 days. All the attribution retraining sessions, consisting of four components were conducted in a whole group setting" (Horner & Gaither, 2004, p. 167). Horner and Gaither (2004) found that the ARI did have some effect; however, the impact was not as significant as originally hypothesized. Researchers found a significant decrease in students' attributions to events that appeared to be out of their control, but found ARI not to be as effective in a whole classroom setting as originally anticipated. They suggest that this instruction can be effective when working in a one on one setting or if it is implemented over a longer period of time.

In a similar study, Okolo (1992) wanted to "examine the impact of attribution retraining, embedded within a mathematics computer-assisted instructional (CAI) program, on students' attributions, persistence, and mathematics" (p. 327). Like Horner and Gaither's study (2004), this study had mixed results. Okolo (1992) found that attribution retraining had limited effects on

students' attributions. "Although changes in attributions for effort were in the predicted direction, both attribution retraining and control students' attributions for success to ability tended to decrease over the course of the study" (Okolo, 1992, p. 331). However, the study's findings did indicate that students who were exposed to attribution retraining completed more work and had math scores that were significantly higher than their counterparts.

### **Attribution and Social Skills in Elementary Students**

While there has been extensive research in academic settings attempting to establish a connection between academic achievement and attributions, Goetz and Dweck (1980) planned research on examining how attributions affect students in social settings. Goetz and Dweck's (1980) study "addresses the relationship between causal attributions and responses to social rejection across popularity levels, focusing on individual differences along each dimension" (p. 247). Researchers found that when students attributed social rejection to internal factors their response would be negative (Goetz & Dweck, 1980). To overcome these "rejection attributions," Goetz and Dweck (1980) focused on changing the behavior after the child was rejected (p. 247). The data showed that rejection attributions related to negative beliefs about oneself (e.g., personal incompetence) existed in each level of popularity (Goetz & Dweck, 1980). The study's findings also indicate that popularity levels are not an indicator of a child's capability to socialize with his or her peers (Goetz & Dweck, 1980). Goetz and Dweck (1980) explain that "across popularity levels, incompetence attributions were associated with little constructive change in strategy" (p. 254).

### **Gender and Learned Helplessness in School Aged Children**

Mai, Jain, & Yadav (1990) explored attributional patterns and learned helplessness of young, rural Indian students who suffered prolonged deprivations. The researchers described “deprivations” as the loss or lack of basic needs that continued long periods of time (Mai et al., 1990). In addition, researchers theorized that gender would play a significant role in this development and the female students would be more at risk for developing learned helplessness than their male counterparts (Mai et al., 1990). The study’s findings did support the notion that having prolonged deprivation or lack of basic needs can affect a student’s academic performance, and that students’ current socioeconomic state could play a detrimental role on their attributions (Mai et. al, 1990). In addition, the study’s data did support the conclusions that female students were more prone to develop learned helplessness when compared to their male counterparts. However, the researchers warn that cultural standards need to be taken into account when interpreting and attempting to reproduce this study in another setting.

### **Parents’ Influence on Learned Helplessness**

Researchers have explored the relationship between parental influences on learned helplessness and students’ academic achievement (Hodoka & Finchman, 1995; Walling & Martinek, 1995). For example, Hokoda and Finchman (1995) investigated the connection between mother and child interactions and that child’s attribution for success and failure in an academic setting. Hodoka and Finchman assessed students at the end of their third grade year and then brought back students and their mothers during the following summer. The researchers observed the language mothers used when their child faced tasks that were deliberately unsolvable. Hodoka and Finchman (1995) discuss the differences found between the mothers of

“mastery children” versus the mothers of students who were considered “helpless” (pp. 375-385). The data supported the conclusion that mothers of mastery children have more empathy when their child faced an insolvable task and provided encouraging feedback in comparison to mothers of the helpless children. Hodoka and Finchman (1995) explain that the major difference between these two groups was the amount of time elapsed before the mothers gave the directives to quit. Mothers of mastery children would encourage their children to continue to try even when the presented task was insolvable.

In a case study done by Walling and Martinek (1995) a developed comprehensive profile showed a poor parental influence on a student was learned helpless. When discussing “family relationships and circumstances,” the researchers noted that the student was raised by a teenage mother who had a limited education educational background (Walling & Martinek, 1995, p. 457). Walling and Martinek (1995) indicated that the student’s mother narrated a pattern of familial instability in the home that could have negatively impacted both herself and her child. The researchers detailed the severe signs of neglect in the home that have influenced the student’s academic and social functioning. Walling and Martinek (1995) believed that financial problems were a primary result of neglect and that the mother’s educational background affected her inability to promote academic achievement in the home. The researchers even stated that the mother-child relationship was positive and when requested, can be involved in her child’s education. This case study did prove that the student’s learned helpless condition was so critical that a generalized intervention program could not be designed to assist in removal (Walling & Martinek, 1995).

### **Students with Disabilities and Learned Helplessness**

Extensive research exists on how students with disabilities are affected by their negative attributions towards academic achievement. Because students receiving special education services are more prone to experience academic failure, their attributions and locus of control are likely to be negative. For example, Kerr (2001) argues “that a diagnosis of dyslexia may be a maladaptive attribution and so inevitably induce learned helplessness” (p. 82). This researcher also suggests that the label may affect the student’s teacher. Kerr (2001) explains that the teacher may have preconceived notions about the students’ academic abilities, which may in turn cause the teacher to have feelings of helplessness when attempting to educate the student.

Butkowsky and Willows (1980) suggest that students with disabilities have attributional beliefs different from those of their non-disabled peers. These researchers conducted a study to examine the impact of attributional retraining on improving students identified as having a learning disability (LD) summarization and reading comprehension (p. 47). Butkowsky and Willows (1980) found that attributional retraining did improve the performance of students with LD in summarization and reading comprehension. However, in spite of these results, the researchers noted that they could not remove attributions that have been embedded for a long period of time in the student with LD.

In a study related to that conducted by Borkowski et al. (1988), Banks and Woolfson (2008) investigated the effects of negative attributions on school achievement in students identified with LD. Similar to tasks presented in the study conducted by Hodoka and Finchman (1995), participants in this particular study were also asked to complete a task that was, unbeknownst to them, unsolvable. When students were grouped according to their attributions



about their achievements, the results skewed. “Participants who felt themselves not to be as good as most people at doing their schoolwork also tended to see themselves as having less control over the outcome of their performance” (Banks & Woolfson, 2008, p. 53). These researchers also suggest that how a student views his or her own abilities has a much more significant impact than does teacher perceptions of the student (Banks & Woolfson, 2008).

Pasta et al., (2013) conducted a study to explore if maladaptive attribution styles were associated with a specific learning disability (SLD). Additionally, researchers examined the relationship between achievement in students with SLD and without any reported disabilities, along with their attribution for success and failure (Pasta et al., 2013). In comparison, both groups are able to recognize the importance of increased effort towards completing academic tasks. However, Pasta et al., (2013) reported that students with SLD do not have a “strong, stable attribute style with internal locus” (p. 661). Also, the study’s results indicated that students with SLD related external factors to success and were more dependent on teachers for academics.

### **Teachers Influence on Students with Learned Helplessness**

Jones and Hensley (2012) explain how the relationship between a child and teacher is important in a variety of areas that can significantly impact a student’s growth and development. Research indicates that when students feel they are positively supported by their classroom teachers, then they are more likely to have a high self-esteem (Jones & Hensley, 2012). Jones and Hensley (2012) not only examined the student-teacher relationship, but they also evaluate how placement and social support from peers affects the student's’ self-determination. Participants were adolescents and identified as having an intellectual disability, either in a self-contained classroom or a resource room. Jones and Hensley (2012) found that when students

were placed in a resource room, they were less dependent on the classroom teacher and had increased self-determination than those in self-contained classrooms. In addition the researchers found teachers' views of the students' in the self-contained classroom resulted in students' increased dependency on their teachers. Jones and Hensley (2012) suggest more opportunities available in resource rooms to make choices and have autonomy will help to increase students' self-determination and may help decrease their dependency on their classroom teacher.

### **Chapter Summary**

IDEA is the primary educational legislation that guarantees students with disabilities have equal access to a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment (Rothstein & Johnson, 2013). This law ensures that schools and educators maintain a high expectation for students who classified in special education (Rothstein & Johnson, 2014; Webber & Plotts, 2008). These expectations are important for students with disabilities who have developed the learned helpless condition. During the early twentieth century, researchers explored the concepts of classical conditioning and learned helplessness. This research has greatly contributed to understanding the origins of student failure and negative attributions. Learned helplessness is defined as a conditioned response to circumstances that appear out of one's locus of control (Gordon & Gordon, 2006). Students who have developed this condition have learned to attribute their failures to internal factors which can affect academic achievement. Although students with disabilities are more susceptible to this condition, Gordon and Gordon (2006) explain that learned helplessness is not a learning problem and can be remedied with the appropriate amount of support. Furthermore, this condition is more likely to be amplified in a

school setting because of the probability of being exposed to failure, success, and criticism (Walling & Martinek, 1995).

Walling and Martinek (1995) express the importance of understanding a student's background information in order to determine whether a student's learned helpless condition has increased in severity. Advances in a student's condition can occur through exposure to repeated cycles of failure in school. Researchers have conducted studies using attributional retraining techniques to determine if the learned helpless condition can be removed. A common finding in this research suggests that while effective, many of these interventions need time, in the appropriate environment, to be successful. Research has also shown that parental influences have a significant effect on a student's learned helpless condition. Borkowski et al., (1988); Banks and Woolfson (2008); Kerr (2001) explored how prevalent learned helplessness is among students with disabilities and emphasized a higher probability of severity due to increased exposures to failure. Special education teachers have a significant impact on a student's learned helpless condition. A positive student-teacher relationship and an appropriate amount of support can promote self-esteem, motivation, and confidence that will help support the removal of learned helplessness in students with disabilities.

### **Chapter III**

#### **Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the knowledge and beliefs of special education teachers at suburban Chicago public high schools regarding the theory of learned helplessness as it relates to students with mild to moderate disabilities. A quantitative descriptive research method was used to collect and analyze data (Gay, Mills, & Airasian 2012). The researcher implemented a survey design method to assess special educators' perceptions of the learned helplessness condition (Gay et al., 2012). The results of this study were used to support the need to increase special education teachers' awareness of learned helplessness as it relates to the academic achievement of students with mild to moderate disabilities.

#### **Participants**

Participants selected for this study were special education teachers from a public high school located in a south suburb of Chicago, Illinois. According to the 2014 Illinois School Report Card, reported enrollment at this public high school is 1,186 with 17.3% of the student population identified as having a disability. About 94 percent of the student population is African American, 75% are from low income households, and 4% of the classified as homeless. There were a reported 218 teachers working district wide for the suburban Chicago public high school; about 60% of these teachers are Caucasian and about 34% are African American.

Other participants selected for this study were chosen using snowball sampling (Gay et al., 2012). The researcher will distribute surveys to graduate students in the Multicategorical Special Education program at Governors State University. Graduate students will assist the researcher in identifying additional participants that fit the criteria for this study. These

participants will also be special education teachers working in south suburban Chicago public high schools and surrounding areas.

### **Instrumentation**

#### **Survey Design**

The primary data collection instrument used in this study was a survey design created using the online software Google Forms (see Appendix A). The first two questions of the survey collected general information about the participants. Then, special educators were asked to rate Likert items that addressed their background knowledge on the learned helpless condition. Participants were then presented with various student behaviors that assessed their ability to identify specific characteristics of students with the learned helpless condition in the classroom. This portion of the survey was adapted from a checklist designed by Finchman, Hodoka, and Sanders (1989). The researcher chose this measure as a reference because it “was developed to explore teachers’ reports as means of identifying learned helpless children” (Finchman et al., 1989, p. 140). In total, there were 20 items included in the survey. At the end of the survey, participants were provided with an optional, open-ended comments section in which they were encouraged to share any thoughts, beliefs, or experiences as it relates to the learned helpless condition.

#### **Reliability and Validity**

To determine validity, the survey design used for this research study was analyzed by an expert panel (Gay et al., 2012). The panel consisted of the researcher’s peers, who were graduate students at Governors State University. Graduate students all had various backgrounds working in education and are currently conducting research studies in the field of special education for the

university. Additionally, the survey design used for this study was examined by a professor in the Multicategorical Special Education Program at Governors State University.

### **Procedures**

#### **Data Collection**

This investigation was conducted during the spring semester of 2016 for the Graduate Seminar course at Governors State University in partial fulfillment for the Masters of Arts Degree in Multicategorical Special Education. This study was conducted using quantitative descriptive research to collect data (Gay et al., 2012). A survey design method was used to gather numerical data and to assess special educators' knowledge and beliefs about learned helplessness as it relates to students with mild to moderate disabilities (Gay et al., 2012). Survey instruments were distributed via email to special education teachers at a public high school located in Chicago, Illinois. Educators were provided a link and specified instructions to complete the developed survey using the online software program, Google Forms. A cover letter was provided to participants that provided the purpose of study and ensured confidentiality (see Appendix A). After two weeks, all participants received an email reminder to complete and submit the provided survey. For the participants' convenience, the access link and specified instructions for the survey were provided as a part of the reminder.

When collecting data from participants using snowball sampling, the researcher provided graduate students enrolled in the Graduate Seminar course the access link and instructions for the survey design used in this study. Each student was also given ten paper copies of the cover letter and survey to administer to identified participants. The researcher met with the graduate students

every Thursday and discussed the status of the distributed surveys. Additional materials were provided to students when needed.

### **Data Analysis**

Quantitative descriptive research was used to analyze the numerical data collected from received surveys. The survey was designed using a bipolar scale (Gay et al., 2012). Likert item response options were assigned numerical values, which allowed for calculations of mean scores. Responses were recorded in an excel spreadsheet. The instrument used to create the survey, Google Forms, also provided the researcher a total summary of collected data. Additionally, the software allowed the researcher access to responses of individual surveys. The researcher used descriptive statistical analysis to compare the responses of participants based on years of special education teaching experience.

### **Chapter Summary**

This purpose of this research study was to conduct an investigation of special educators' knowledge and perceptions of the learned helpless condition in regards to students identified with mild to moderate disabilities. Participants for this study were special education teachers at suburban Chicago public high schools. Selected participants were special educators from a public high school located in a south suburb of Chicago, IL. Other participants included in this study were special education teachers at various other suburban Chicago public high schools and surrounding areas. These participants were selected using snowball sampling (Gay et al., 2012). To conduct this study, the researcher used quantitative descriptive research implementing a survey design to collect and analyze data (Gay et al., 2012).

## **Chapter IV**

### **Results**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the knowledge and beliefs of special education teachers regarding the theory of learned helplessness as it relates to students identified with mild to moderate disabilities. To collect and analyze data, a quantitative descriptive research method was implemented (Gay et al., 2012). A survey design method was used to collect general demographic information about special educators and to evaluate their perceptions and background knowledge of the learned helpless condition (Gay et al., 2012). Additionally, participants were presented with various student behaviors that assessed educators' ability to identify learned helplessness in the classroom. A total of fifty surveys were distributed to special education teachers from suburban Chicago public high schools. Of the surveys distributed, 40 were returned for a rate of 80%.

### **Demographics**

There were 40 special education teachers who participated in this research study. On the survey instrument used, educators were asked to give the following demographic data: gender, highest level of education received, and the number of years of experience as a special education teacher. Of the participants, 75% were female and 25% were male. 80% of participants indicated their highest level of education is a Master's Degree, 15% a Bachelor's Degree, and 5% Doctorate Degree. Data collected indicated that a majority of participants have ten years of experience or less as a special education teacher. 68% of participants had between 1 to 10 years of experience as a special education teacher, 23% had between 11 to 20 years of experience, and 13% had 21 to 30 years of experience.

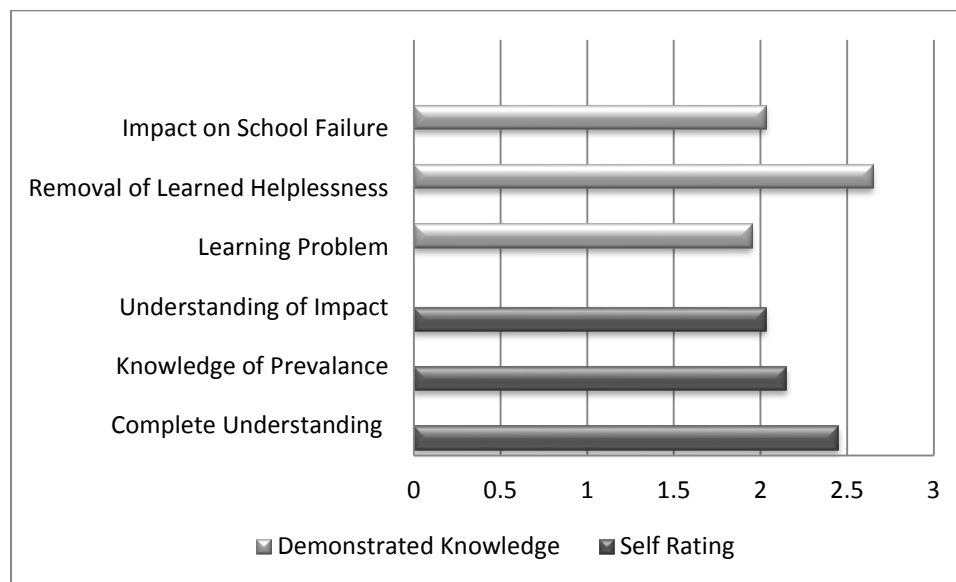


### **Background Knowledge and Beliefs**

To assess participants' background knowledge and beliefs, the survey instrument required special education teachers to rate their understanding of the learned helpless condition. Additionally, special educators were presented with facts about learned helplessness as a way to examine if participants' rating of prior knowledge and beliefs were consistent with their actual knowledge. When surveyed, 55% of participants agreed that they have a complete understanding of learned helplessness, 35% somewhat agreed, and 10% disagreed. 28% of participants rated that their knowledge of the prevalence of learned helplessness in students with moderate disabilities as high, 38% rated their knowledge as average, and 35% rated their knowledge as low. Almost half of special education teachers surveyed felt confident about his or her understanding of the learned helplessness and its impact on academic achievement in students with disabilities. 45% of participants rated their understanding as high, 33% rated their understanding as average, and 20% rated their understanding as low.

When asked if learned helplessness is not a learning problem, 33% of participants agreed, 30% somewhat agreed, and 38% disagreed. According to Gordon and Gordon (2006) learned helplessness is not a learning problem. Therefore, educators who agreed with this statement demonstrate an understanding of learned helplessness. Additionally, considering all of the participants surveyed held the belief that the learned helpless condition can be removed and that the condition impacts school failure, this data also shows that educators have an understanding of the learned helplessness. When surveyed, 65% agreed with the belief that learned helplessness can be removed and 35% somewhat agreed. 68% of participants agreed with the belief that learned helplessness impacts school failure and 33% somewhat agreed.

Figure 1 shows a comparison of special educators' self-ratings on their background knowledge and beliefs of learned helplessness and their ability demonstrate knowledge by accurately responding to the statements given. Likert items were rated based on the following: High-3, Average-2, and Low-1; Agree-3, Somewhat Agree-2, and Disagree-1. In the figure, ratings closer to three indicate that participants' self-ratings were higher and that they were able to demonstrate knowledge by accurately responding or agreeing with the statements provided. Data shown in the figure does not show a significant difference in participants' demonstrated knowledge and their self-ratings.



*Figure 1.* Comparison of special educators' self-rating on their background knowledge and beliefs on the theory of learned helplessness and accurate responses given that demonstrate knowledge about the theory.

### **Recognizing Learned Helplessness**

Special education teachers were asked to rate their ability to identify symptoms of learned helplessness in students identified with mild to moderated disabilities on a Likert scale of

High, Average, and Low. A majority of participants rated their ability as either high or average. Additionally, participants were asked to rate their understanding of their students' attributions towards success and failure on this same Likert scale. Similar to the first item, a majority of special educators rated their level of understanding as either high or average. 0%. Table 2 shown below lists the percentages of data collected from the survey instrument.

Table 2

*Recognizing Learned Helplessness*

Themes	n	High %	Average %	Low %
Ability to identify symptoms	40	38	40	25
Understanding of attributions	40	40	40	25

Note: n= total number of participants. High=the percent of participants that gave a self-rating of high; Average= the percent of participants that gave a self-rating of average; and Low= percent of participants that gave a self-rating of low.

To further assess participant's knowledge on learned helplessness, the survey instrument listed specific student behaviors that are typically seen in the classroom. Special educators were asked to determine, based on their opinion, whether these behaviors were an indicator of a student who has developed learned helplessness. For this portion of the survey instrument, participants were to mark Yes or No to the statements given. Data collected indicated a majority of participants were able to accurately identify specific characteristics of a student who has developed learned helplessness. When surveyed, 75% or more of participants were able to mark the correct response to the items presented. As shown below, Table 3 lists the behaviors

presented in the survey instrument, the number of participants that answered correctly, and the percentage.

Table 3

*Characteristics of Learned Helplessness*

Student Behaviors	n	%
Asks for help more than necessary	30	75
Completes challenging assignments	35	88
Becomes easily frustrated	33	83
Expects to do well on school work	35	88
Takes little independent initiative	38	95
After failing will continue to perform poorly	31	78
Talks about trying harder after a poor grade	30	75

Note: n= number of participants who answered correctly out of 40. %= percent of participants who provided a correct response. Student Behaviors are summarized and can be read in their entirety in survey instrument under Appendix A.

### **Participant Feedback**

At the end of the survey participants were encouraged to share any thoughts or opinions they had on learned helplessness. Out of the 13 responses given, two participants stated that they had little or no prior knowledge on the learned helplessness condition. One participant indicated that the survey was difficult to complete because he did not have any prior knowledge on the learned helplessness theory and that his responses were given solely based on a contextual meaning of the theory. The other participant stated that she had a basic understanding but wanted to learn

more about the learned helplessness theory. Additionally the participant indicated that school administrators should make educators aware of the prevalence of the learned helplessness and possible removal strategies. When surveyed, 65% of participants did not think their school provided adequate information about the theory of learned helplessness.

Another participant indicated that learned helplessness is a problem, however, found it difficult to find a balance between support and too much support. She states that some students may not be successful if they are not provided that guided support to start in certain areas. This participant indicated that with her lack of experience in special education as a first year teacher, it is hard to judge “when to take the training wheels off.” Another suggested that modified assignments or additional accommodations are a way to find that balance and to assist students become more successful. Also, to ensure the curriculum is on the correct level for the student’s individual ability.

Several participants commented on the importance of positive praise and encouragement for students who have developed the learned helplessness condition. One statement explains how educators should ensure students don’t feel like failures in the classroom. She went on to say that when students fail, they shut down as an avoidance behavior to academics. Participants also indicated that support for the removal of learned helplessness should come from multiple sources including but not limited to home, school, and their surrounding communities. Additionally, participants agreed that even the smallest successes by students should be recognized and praised in order to help them gain self-esteem.

### **Chapter Summary**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the knowledge and beliefs of special education teachers regarding the theory of learned helplessness as it relates to students identified with mild to moderate disabilities. To collect data, a survey design instrument was implemented and distributed to fifty participants. In total, 40 special education teachers from suburban Chicago public high schools chose to participate in this study which resulted in a return rating of 80%. The demographic data shows that a majority of participants were female, held their Master's Degree, and had between 1 to 10 years of experience as a special education teacher. Data collected in the study was broken down into the following three major subsections: Background and Beliefs, Recognizing Learned Helplessness, and Participant Feedback.

A majority of participants provided self-ratings which indicated that they had a general background knowledge of learned helplessness. All participants agreed or somewhat agreed with the belief that learned helplessness impacts school failure and that the condition can be removed. Additionally, a majority of participants either rated themselves as high or average when asked about the ability to identify characteristics of learned helplessness in students with mild to moderate disabilities and their understanding of student attributions towards success and failure. A large majority were able to accurately identify student behaviors that were indicative of learned helplessness. When analyzing written feedback from participants there were various concerns about inadequate information on the theory of learned helplessness from the institution in which they teach. Also, there was an emphasis placed on the importance of positive praise for students who have learned helplessness.

## **Chapter V**

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

To investigate special education teachers' knowledge and beliefs on learned helplessness as it relates to students with mild to moderate disabilities, a quantitative descriptive research study was designed and implemented using a survey design method. The survey instrument distributed to participants addressed the following two questions that guided this research study. The first question posed was focused on the background knowledge special education teachers had on the overall concept of learned helplessness. The second addressed teachers' beliefs about learned helplessness effects on the academic achievement of students with mild to moderate disabilities. A total of fifty surveys were distributed and 40 were returned resulting in a return rate of 80%.

Data collected showed that a majority of special educators had an overall understanding of the concept of learned helplessness. Also, data indicated that special educators did not feel as confident about their prior knowledge of the prevalence of learned helplessness in students with mild to moderate disabilities. Self-ratings were also lower when special educators were asked to rate their understanding of the impact learned helplessness has on the academic achievement of students with mild to moderate disabilities and of their students' attributions to school success and failure. Results also showed that most of the participants were able to accurately identify behaviors that were indicative of students with learned helplessness.

### **Discussion**

Research supports that learned helplessness is prevalent in students with mild to moderate disabilities and impacts academic achievement (Banks & Woolfson, 2008; Borkowski, et al, 1988; Hodoka & Finchman, 1995; Kerr 2001). Horner and Gaither (2004) explain how there is a

direct correlation between academic achievement and students who develop maladaptive attributions as a result of being learned helpless. Unfortunately, educators often struggle with understanding what causes school failure or lack of task persistence in students who are otherwise capable (Horner & Gaither, 2004; Gordon & Gordon, 2006; Sutherland & Singh, 2006; Walling & Martinek, 1995). Special educators may actually reinforce behaviors that are indicative of learned helplessness because of lack of awareness. The more educated special education teachers are on the learned helpless condition, the more students can receive the right amount of support and guidance in the classroom, which can ultimately prevent or remove negative attributions.

### **Background Knowledge and Beliefs**

Research supports the need for educators to understand learned helplessness and its impact on academic achievement (McCarter, 2013). Special education teachers' knowledge on this subject can lead to the prevention and possible removal of this condition; which can ultimately increase academic achievement among students with disabilities (Gordon & Gordon, 2006; Sutherland & Singh, 2006; Walling & Martinek, 1995). Survey responses indicated that a majority of participants agreed or somewhat agreed that they had a complete understanding of learned helplessness. 65% of participants rated their knowledge of the prevalence of learned helplessness in students with disabilities as either high or average. A majority of special education teachers rated their understanding of the impact of learned helplessness on the academic achievement of students with mild to moderate disabilities as either high or average. All participants surveyed held the belief that there are strategies to remove learned helplessness and that it does impact school failure. Participants' beliefs correspond with previous studies that



learned helplessness can be removed and it does impact academic achievement (Borkowski et al., 1988; Banks and Woolfson, 2008; Kerr, 2001).

### **Recognizing Learned Helplessness**

A case study conducted by Walling and Martinek (1995) noted the importance of understanding a student's background and attributions in order to grasp the complexity of his or her learned helpless condition. In this case study, the student's learned helplessness had advanced and existed across multiple contexts which made the condition more difficult to remove (Walling & Martinek, 1995). This case study also discussed the importance of identifying the learned helpless condition as early as possible because it can increase in severity with continuous exposure to failures. Since participants are special educators in high schools, it is necessary for them to have a higher understanding on how to recognize learned helplessness in students with disabilities. By high school, students will have had multiple opportunities to be exposed to cycles of school failure, which will only have justified their maladaptive attributions towards academic achievement.

Data collected in this research study showed that 75% or more of special educators should be able to recognize specific characteristics in students who developed the learned helplessness condition. However, only 38% of participants rated their ability to identify symptoms as high. Also, 40% of participants rated their understanding of their students' attributions to success and failure as high. In both areas, 40% participants felt their ability and understanding were average. The staggering self-ratings given by participants shows that there is need to continue to educate special education teachers about the importance of being able to

recognize learned helplessness in students and on removal strategies once the condition becomes more complex.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the obtained and analyzed data from the surveyed special education teachers working at suburban Chicago public high schools, a majority seem to have an understanding on the overall concept of learned helplessness. Also, most educators felt they had at least an average understanding on the prevalence of learned helplessness in students with disabilities. All participants generally agreed that learned helplessness impacts school achievement in students with mild to moderate disabilities. However, the special educators surveyed were split between having a high and an average understanding on the impact the condition has on academic achievement in students with disabilities. Due to a small sampling size, time constraints, and the general statements given on the survey design instrument, further research should be conducted to determine if special education teachers have an accurate understanding of the learned helpless condition as it relates to students identified as having mild to moderate disabilities.

### **Educational Implications**

Based on results of this research study, there needs to be an increased awareness of learned helplessness among special education teachers. It is recommended that further research is conducted among high school special and general education teachers about their ability to recognize learned helplessness and the removal strategies that are most effective for students who have developed the learned helpless condition. Additionally, research needs to be conducted to see the best strategies to remove learned helplessness that is considered severe and extends across multiple contexts. It is also recommended that research be conducted on special and

general educators who are teaching elementary grade levels. Due to the complexity of the learned helpless condition, an understanding of removal strategies of learned helplessness may be more effective in earlier grades for students with mild to moderate disabilities.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Although data collected in this study shows that a majority of special educators have at least basic understanding of learned helplessness, there is still a need to increase comprehension of complexity and severity. Furthermore, data collected shows that special educators are not being offered any professional development opportunities by their institution to further their knowledge on this theory. 65% of participants indicated that the school that where they teach has not provided them with adequate information in regards to learned helplessness. Additionally, a female participant stated that she wanted her administration to provide more opportunities to learn about the theory and possible removal strategies. Further research about the learned helpless condition could extend to investigating if there are professional developments available for educators and if they are effective.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the knowledge and beliefs of special educators at suburban Chicago public high schools regarding the theory of learned helplessness as it relates to students with mild to moderate disabilities. Many educators have difficulties understanding what causes school failure in students who are academically capable (Walling & Martinek, 1995). Additionally, students with mild to moderate disabilities are prone to developing learned helplessness in comparison to their non-disabled peers due to increased opportunities to be exposed to academic failure (Banks & Woolfson, 2008; Borkowski,

Weyhing, & Carr, 1988; Kerr, 2001). Students with disabilities who have developed the learned helpless condition have maladaptive attributions towards success and failure. The intention of this study was to support a need to increase awareness for special educators about the theory of learned helplessness as it relates to students with mild to moderate disabilities.

The primary educational legislation that guarantees students with disabilities have equal access to a free and appropriate public education in the most least restrictive environment is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) (Rothstein & Johnson, 2013). This legislation ensures schools have high expectations for students identified with disabilities and could play a role in student self-perceptions of their abilities. Walling and Martinek (1995) explain that a school environment is an ideal situation for being exposed to failure and criticism which can justify a student's negative attributions towards academic success and failure. The learned helpless condition can potentially increase in severity when students are continuously exposed to repeated cycles of school failure. Previous studies show that attributional retraining techniques can remove learned helplessness in children. A common finding in research is that attribution retraining techniques can be effective when given the right amount of time in the appropriate learning environment. Educators can have a significant role in removing learned helplessness because they are able to provide the appropriate amount of guidance and support that can boost self-esteem, motivation, and self-perceptions of academic capabilities in students with mild to moderate disabilities.

A quantitative descriptive research method was used to collect and analyze data of this research study. A survey design method was designed and administered to assess special education teachers' perceptions of learned helplessness in students with mild to moderate

disabilities. The participants of this study were special educators from suburban Chicago public high schools. A total of fifty surveys were sent to participants and 40 surveys were returned with a resulting return rate of 80%. Of participants surveyed, a majority gave themselves average to high ratings on their understanding and background knowledge of learned helplessness in students with mild to moderate disabilities. Additionally, all participants agreed or somewhat agreed with the belief that learned helplessness impacts academic achievement and that learned helpless can be removed. When asked to identify if student behaviors were a characteristic of the learned helpless condition, 75% and more of the participants surveyed were able to provide accurate responses. Further research is suggested to continue to increase special educators' knowledge of learned helplessness, which can ultimately increase academic achievement in students with disabilities.

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**Appendix A:**  
**Cover Letter and Survey**

## Cover Letter

Dear Educators,

As part of my master's degree in the Multicategorical Special Education (MCSE) program at Governors State University, I am conducting a research study for which I need input from special education teachers. I would appreciate any feedback you can give me by filling out the provided survey about the theory of learned helplessness. The purpose of this study is to investigate special educators' knowledge and beliefs about the learned helpless condition as it relates to students with mild to moderate disabilities.

If you would like to participate, please complete and submit the online survey at your earliest convenience. *Please note, that by completing and submitting the "Learned Helplessness" survey you are giving your consent to be a participant in this study.* Your participation is completely optional and will be kept confidential. Listed below is a direct access link to the survey created using the online software "Google Forms." If you have any questions or are having difficulty accessing the online survey, feel free to contact me at

[REDACTED] Or my professor Dr. Philip Boudreau at [REDACTED]

Thank you for your time and support.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Engemann

I've invited you to fill out the form **Learned Helplessness Survey**. To fill it out, visit:

[https://docs.google.com/\[REDACTED\]](https://docs.google.com/[REDACTED])

[REDACTED]

# Learned Helplessness Survey

\* Required

## 1. Gender: \*

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female

## 2. Number of years working as a special education teacher: \*

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## 3. Highest Level of Education: \*

Check all that apply.

- ☐ Bachelors Degree
- ☐ Masters Degree
- ☐ Doctorate Degree

## 4. Please mark the most appropriate response appropriate for the statements listed below: \*

Mark only one oval per row.

	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Disagree
I have a complete understanding of learned helplessness.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The school where I teach has provided me adequate information about learned helplessness	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In my opinion, learned helplessness impacts school failure	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Learned helplessness is not a learning problem.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I believe that there are ways to remove learned helplessness	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**5. Please rate the following based on your prior knowledge of the theory of learned helplessness: \***

*Mark only one oval per row.*

	Low	Average	High
Knowledge of the prevalence of learned helplessness in students with mild to moderate disabilities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Ability to identify symptoms of learned helplessness in students with mild to moderate disabilities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Understanding of the impact that learned helplessness has on the academic achievement of students with mild to moderate disabilities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Understanding of my students attributions (casual explanations) to academic success and failure	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**6. In your opinion, are the behaviors listed below an indication of a students who have developed learned helplessness. Please mark Yes or No. \***

*Mark only one oval per row.*

	Yes	No
Will ask for help from the classroom teacher, aides, or other students more than necessary	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Attempts to complete an assignment, even if it is (or appears) challenging	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Becomes easily frustrated when attempting an obstacle or a challenging academic task	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Expects to do well, overall, on school work and is not surprised at academic success	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Takes little independent initiative; needs help to get started and to complete an assignment or task	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
After failing on a few problems, will continue to perform poorly on remaining problems, even though they are within the students range of ability	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When receiving a poor grade is likely to say something about trying harder (example: "I didn't concentrate enough that time")	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**7. Your input as a special education teacher is high valued! If you have any thoughts or opinions on learned helplessness or if you wish to share a teaching experience working with a student with learned helplessness, please do so below.**

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